

Once upon a time

In the beginning, once upon a time; surely that's how the story starts in all the best tales. And how about the ending? – and they all lived happily ever after; they sailed off into the sunset, the music swells, the curtains close, the lights come up!

Because of course all the best stories have a happy ending, don't they? If a plot isn't neatly tied off with the hero getting the heroine, the baddies getting 'their comeuppance' and the goodies prevailing, we feel uncomfortable, dissatisfied that order has not been restored. The battle between the forces of good and evil must end with good prevailing.

The Bible is no different. From the opening sentences of the book of Genesis and John's Gospel 'In the beginning' to 'The Grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen' at the conclusion of the Revelation to John. In between the opening words and the closing sentences anything can and does happen.

Through the books of the Old Testament scriptures, we follow the travails of the Israelites as they journey through a challenging world, fighting to retain their identity in a hostile environment which threatens to destroy their way of life and beliefs; life and death decisions must be made and within its pages we learn of how their relationship with God evolves. Unlike the characters of Greek myths or Norse sagas, these are not supernatural men and women in heroic escapades but instead ordinary flesh and blood men and women with frailties and weaknesses we can identify with and whose interaction with God, following his commands are key to developing and moving that relationship onwards. Think of Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel and onwards.

With Jeremiah, we have an account of his prophetic ministry, personal life and struggles which are shown to a greater depth and detail than those of any other Old Testament prophet. Today's reading gives us a different glimpse of glory from an OT perspective. Jeremiah is promising hope and restoration to the Israelites exiled once more, this time in Babylon. It's a poetic passage presenting a somewhat utopian view of a vulnerable community returning to their own land and finding prosperity and peace after great suffering. The Hebrew verb 'to be radiant' means both 'to flow along' and 'to become bright' suggesting a joyful procession of people who reflect something of the divine light themselves as they recognize God's goodness at work.

Jesus manifests God's radiance although not in the triumphalist manner or the spectacular ways that many expected. His birth, baptism, miracles and even suffering reveal the divine glory for those with eyes to see and the purpose of his entire ministry is to free us from our own 'exile' experiences of guilt, legalism or despair.

In our Ephesians reading, Paul is drawing us to his favourite place – 'in Christ'. It's a somewhat beautiful and complex prayer of blessing extending through the entire reading. It encompasses the full sweep of salvation history. A mediation that begins before the creation of the world, rejoices in its redemption that has been gifted to us and anticipates its summation in the fullness of time. It is in Christ that we are blessed, elected, redeemed, sealed and gathered up. It's the place of surest repose and ultimate challenge to which we can always return wherever we are actually located. It also neatly ties in with our Gospel reading from John.

John's magisterial introduction to his Gospel mirrors the first words of Genesis. He equates God with 'the word', God having brought into 'being' through speech. "and the Word was with God and the Word was God". He was in the beginning with God"

John is gathering together the significant themes that he is going to use to tell his story of the enfleshed Word of God. Light and darkness, life and rebirth, truth, witness, seeing and believing all make an appearance as terms that will be employed in his interpretation of the life and death of the person of Jesus Christ. Crucially despite the fact that no one has ever seen God, what we have seen and will see, is his glory. This is in fact what the only-begotten has made known to us.

Our focus during the Christmas season is on Jesus as the baby in the manger, who is 'of the father's heart begotten'. But when John writes of glory, he is projecting us forward to the man on the cross, who shows us the depth of God's love in a climactic act of self-giving. This glory is not something that the Father and the Son possess in some kind of exclusive arrangement, but is shared with those to whom Jesus has been given. Not only do they see his glory, but he is also glorified in them and astonishingly, as believers, we are called to make this glory our own. That glory is our destiny for all eternity but we know from the pattern set before us, that there is no way to glory except via the cross.

When we want to explore how God works within human history and time, we can struggle to see the bigger picture. The readings we have today provide a snapshot. But rather than see them as in a photograph album we should picture them as more akin to pictures on a hard drive or cloud storage. Thousands and thousands of them going with us in our bags or pockets. A few are treasured but many are scrolled past as we hunt for those special images that tug at our heartstrings or bring a smile to our faces as we recall the event captured in the image. That store of images is like the whole story of the incarnation encountered in the Bible from Genesis through to Revelation. In other words from creation's first beginnings into God's eternal future, the Judgment we have spent Advent trying to comprehend.

From divine fulfilment we have all received 'grace upon grace'. That suggests an ever-growing mound of blessings. But we could translate it as "grace in place of grace", suggesting the old covenant giving way to the new. It is one of the cases where John may have been deliberately ambiguous to good effect. If the text can mean either it can also mean both.

So, through the pages of scripture we can be assured that one day we shall all sail off into the sunset, the music will swell, the lights come up and we will live happily ever after! Amen